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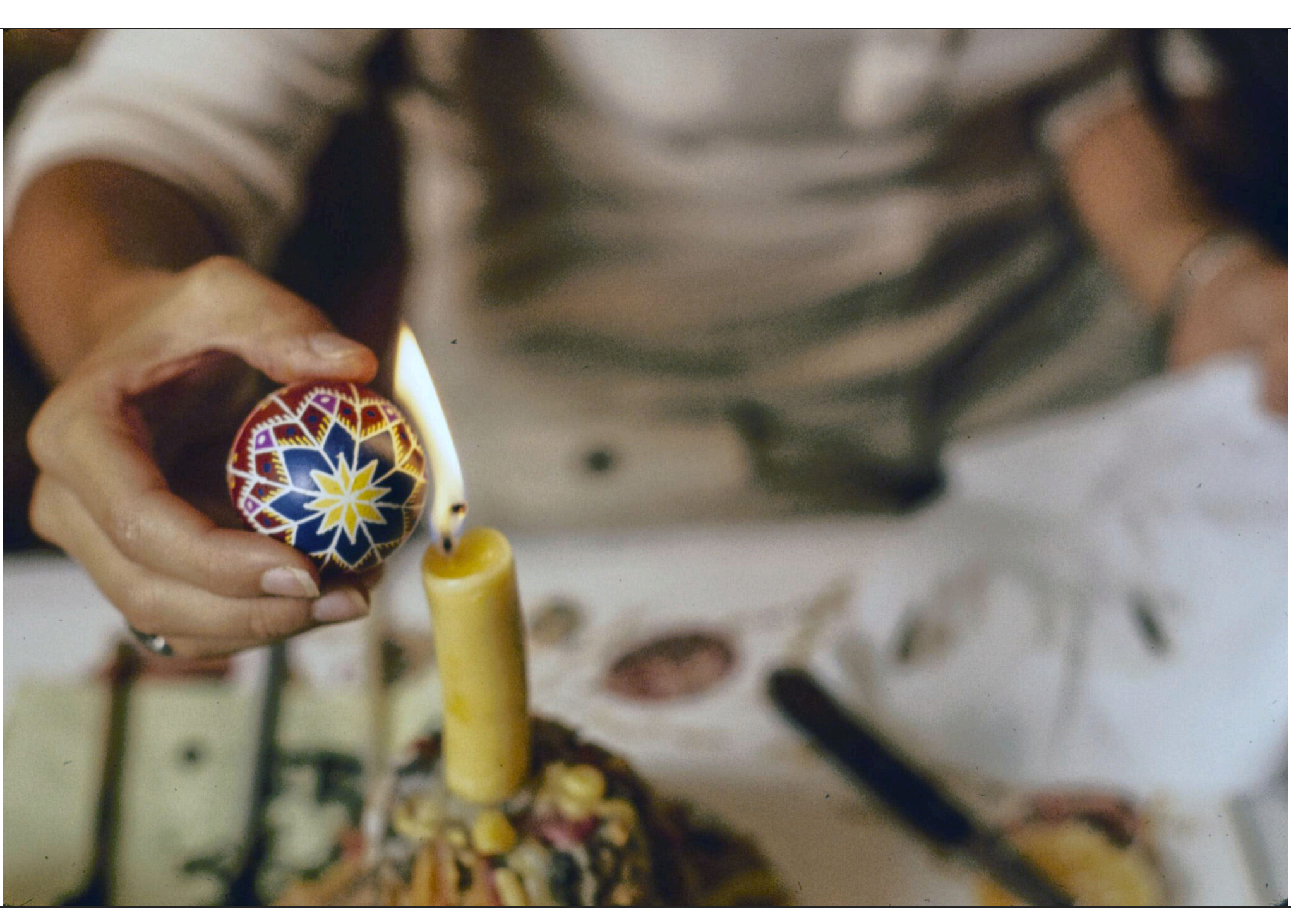

Natalie Michaluk and pysanky (Ukrainian Easter eggs), Rhode Island. Photo by Geraldine Niva Johnson. Rhode Island Folklife Project collection, 1979.

The Ancient Art of Decorating Eggs

April 6, 2017

Posted by: Stephanie Hall

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If you have decorated an egg, then you have participated in one of the oldest decorative arts. Archaeologists have long known of decorated ostrich shell pieces and empty eggs in Africa of great antiquity, found in tombs or archaeological digs, but they did not know how old this custom really was. In 2010 an important find was announced that a team led by Pierre-Jean Texier found a cache of decorated ostrich eggs in layers in South Africa dating from 65,000 to 55,000 years before the present.[1] They had been whole shells, but crushed into fragments over time. These eggs were likely used for storing water, as hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari desert do even today. It is speculated that the designs might have been the mark of individual owners of the shells. An interesting find was that the scratched decorations on the eggs changed over time. Earlier eggs had cross-hatched designs that looked like railroad tracks. Later designs used finer parallel scratches inside of lines. The fragments had several colors, but at least some of these were probably a consequence of being buried in the ground. The natural color of ostrich eggs is cream to yellow, so scratches show the white layer underneath. Examples from more recent ages are sometimes colored all over with red ocher so that the white lines stand out, or have a colorant rubbed into the etched design. But were these shells from the middle stone age colored to highlight the scratched designs? Tests to replicate the results of burial and the possibility that a fire was built over the buried shells suggest that while some of the colors could be caused by these conditions, the red and blues, and perhaps other bright colors, could be a result of intentional coloring.[2]

Ostrich eggs are extremely durable, so they have survived. If stone age peoples decorated eggs of other birds, they would likely decompose. Hen's eggs have been found in ancient Roman tombs. More often, the egg was placed in tombs symbolically in the form of a carved stone.

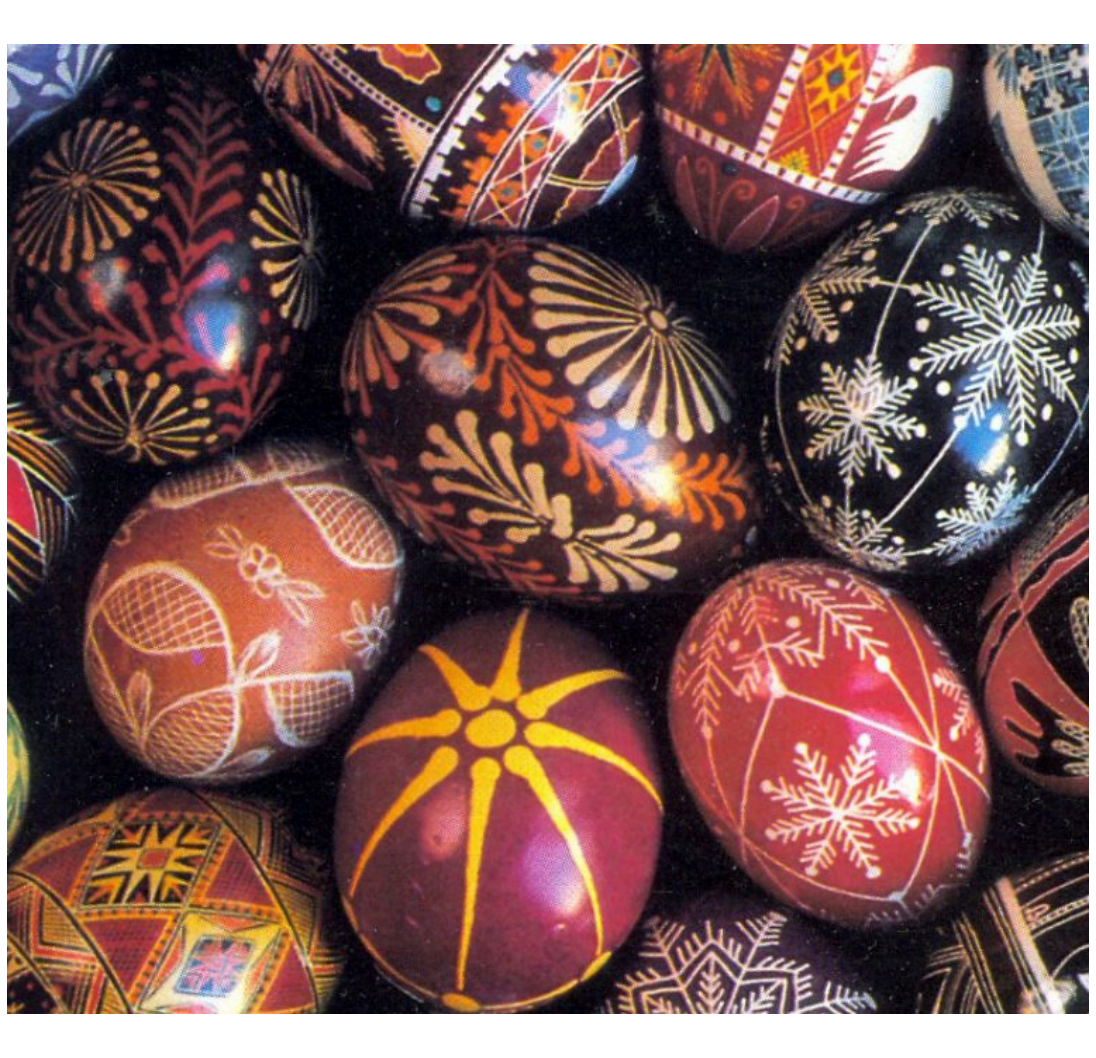
An example of a Nowruz altar, or *haft-seen*, celebrating the vernal equinox and Persian New Year. Decorated eggs are usually included on the haft-seen. This tradition began in Persia in ancient times and has spread to many parts of the world. Photo by the Fairfax Library Foundation, shared on Flickr with a Creative Commons license.

From ancient history to the present eggs have been an important symbol in many cultures. They are part of the creation myths of many peoples, the "cosmic egg" from which all or parts of the universe arises. They often symbolize life, renewal, and rebirth. They figure in much of human folklore, used for healing and protection.

Because human interest in eggs is so old, and many cultures share similar traditions, it is possible that some egg-decorating traditions were carried with our earliest human ancestors as they migrated out of Africa. Whether this is true or not, egg decorating is certainly found in many cultures.

Colored eggs appear on the altars made for the new year known as *Nowruz,* which is celebrated at the vernal equinox. This tradition has ancient roots in Persia and Zoroastrianism, but is now practiced across Eurasia by Persian and Turkic peoples of various faiths. Historically, red was a popular color and red eggs are sometimes prominent in these celebrations today, although altars now may include eggs of all colors. In some regions solid-color eggs have given way to eggs with multicolored decorations.

In Jewish tradition it is a pure white roasted egg that is part of the *seder* plate at Passover. Orthodox Christians in Mesopotamia took the symbol of the Passover egg and dyed it red as a symbol of Christ's blood. This was the beginning of the Easter egg. Red eggs are still prominent in the celebration of Easter in Greece, where people have a game of tapping the hard boiled red eggs against each other. The winner is the owner of the egg that does not break. This game seems to have begun in southern Europe and spread northward. There is also a tradition of a sweet loaf of braided bread with whole red eggs baked into it; it is found in Greece but has also become a tradition among Italian Catholics, with eggs of various colors. So we see how traditions spread from people of the Orthodox faith to peoples of other Christian denominations.



These Easter eggs show two different decoration techniques. The designs with white lines scratched into the colored surface are descended from the oldest known decoration method (the brown egg in the lower left has scratches within lines that are especially similar to ancient ostrich egg decoration). Others are decorated with wax resist designs using a stylus that creates a teardrop shaped stroke. These examples are Polish. Detail of an American Folklife Center photo by Carl Fleischhauer, 1982. From *Egg Art*, 1982 [PDF, 15 pp.].

Since we now know that decorating eggs began in the middle stone age, we see that eggs that have have designs scratched on them represent the earliest egg decorating method. Hen eggs that are brown can be scratched without coloring them and white eggs can be dyed and then scratched. The earliest example in Europe was found in a tomb of a young girl in Worms, Germany and dated to the 4th century.[3] At this time decorated eggs were used at various holidays as well as in burials and were not yet exclusively associated with Easter.

Many dyes used for fabrics were also used to color eggs. Some of these were toxic dyes and are not recommended today, but dying with onion skins, yellow onions for a reddish brown and red onions for a light blue, are still used. Lichens, vegetables such as beets and spinach, and even flower petals have been used to dye eggs. In northern Britain and in Scandinavia, a leaf or flower is placed on an egg, wrapped in onion skins and then boiled. The result is an egg with the impression of a leaf or flower design on it. In Britain these are called "pace eggs" and are given as gifts, and used as a kind of payment to performers of Easter folk plays. "Pace" is thought to derive from Pascha, the Latin name for Easter, itself derived through Greek from an Aramaic word for the Jewish festival of Passover.

Easter egg decorated in the Ukrainian style (*pysanky*) by Mrs. Maria Brama of Chicago, Illinois. This method uses a funnel stylus to draw fine lines on the egg with wax that resist the subsequent layers of dye. *Chicago Ethnic Arts Project Collection*. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer, 1977.

The most elaborate designs are found in Eastern Europe, where women are traditionally the artists responsible for decorating eggs. Wax is carefully applied using one of two tools: either a tiny funnel stylus, or *kistka,* is used to make fine lines, or a stylus with a rounded end is used to drip the wax onto the egg, creating elongated teardrops. The egg is dyed and more wax is applied to create layers of color from light to dark. Examples from Bulgaria are often red with another color, such as yellow, appearing as the lines. These may be examples of the earliest style of these eggs. Ukrainian egg decoration, called *pysanky,* is thought to date to pre-Christian times based on the designs and beliefs about them. Eggs from Ukraine and the surrounding region are among the most elaborate wax-resist designs found anywhere, with many layers of colors. The lace-like designs and cross-hatching made with the finest stylus are similar to European designs achieved by scratching. Similar designs are found on eggs used by those who celebrate Easter and those who celebrate Nowruz in Ukraine, so these traditions seem to have influenced each other. Ukrainian designs have also spread in Eurasia and the Americas. If you would like to try your hand at these styles of decoration, the American Folklife Center has a booklet online, *Egg Art* (1982), that can help you get started.

The Ukrainian Easter egg tradition preserves some of the cultural symbolism and power of decorated eggs that was once very common across Eurasia and still found in some places today. The traditional method is to decorate raw eggs, and the contents are allowed to dry out (although modern artists often use blown eggs). They are given as gifts to preserve the health of the recipient. A bowl of decorated eggs is commonly displayed in homes at all times of year, as they bring health to people in the house. Eggs may be buried near the doorway of a house to protect the health of the people there, or buried by the barn or stable door to protect animals. The symbols on the eggs sometimes have particular meanings about the kinds of protection they may bring. In China, red eggs are given as gifts to a bride and groom, and are also a gift for a new born boy. The egg symbolizes fertility and health, so the egg is supposed grant fertility to a married couple, and to protect the newborn child and bring him good fortune. The fact that these ideas about the magical properties of decorated eggs are spread so widely across Eurasia suggests that the beliefs, like the decorated eggs, are of great antiquity.

Egg decoration continues to develop new forms, and old techniques are often revived, so that there are a wide variety of techniques to try. A couple of techniques seem to be popular right now. Boiling an egg wrapped with silk in a solution of water and vinegar is used to transfer the pattern from the silk to the egg. This is a method many people might try successfully. Old neckties are a handy source of scrap silk. Carving eggs, especially sturdier eggs such as goose eggs, ostrich eggs, and emu eggs, is a technique for the more adventurous egg artist. If you have an egg-decorating technique you would like to share, I will enjoy hearing about it in the comments.

Notes

1. Texier, Pierre-Jean, et al. "A Howiesons Poort tradition of engraving ostrich eggshell containers dated to 60,000 years ago at Diepkloof Rock Shelter, South Africa." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America,* Vol. 107, No. 14 (April 6, 2010), pp. 6180-6185 and Pierre-Jean Texier, et al, "The context, form and significance of the MSA engraved ostrich eggshell collection from Diepkloof Rock Shelter, Western Cape, South Africa," Journal of Archaeological Science 40(9), September 2013. See also: Michael Balter, "Engraved Eggs Suggest Early Symbolism," *Science Magazine,* March 1, 2010, for images of some fragments and a discussion of the importance of the find.
2. Stewart, Brian. "Egg Cetera #6: Hunting for the world's oldest decorated eggs," *Research*, University of Cambridge. Article and a video. The research on the colors of the ostrich egg fragments are explained in the video.
3. Newall, Venetia. "Easter Eggs," *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 80, No. 315 (Jan. – Mar., 1967), pp. 3-32, p. 19. The author cites several sources in footnote #119.

Resources

Chicago Ethnic Arts Project Collection. This presentation includes photographs of Ukrainian-style eggs decorated by Mrs. Maria Brama.

Newall, Venetia. "Easter Eggs," *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 80, No. 315 (Jan. – Mar., 1967), pp. 3-32.

Newall, Venetia. *An Egg At Easter: A Folklore Study*. London, Routledge & K. Paul, 1971.

Newall, Venetia. "Some Notes on the Egg Tree," *Folklore*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Spring, 1967), pp. 39-45.

Rhode Island Folklife Project Collection. This presentation includes Ukranian-style eggs decorated by Natalie Michaluk and two interviews with her on Ukranian traditions. Search on pysanky. [Added March 19, 2018]

Winick, Stephen. "Ostara and the Hare: Not Ancient, but Not As Modern As Some Skeptics Think," *Folklife Today*, April 28, 2016.

Winick, Stephen. "On the Bunny Trail: In Search of the Easter Bunny," *Folklife Today*, March 22, 2016.

CATEGORIES

Easter • Eggs • Holidays • Material Culture • Ukrainian Americans

COMMENTS (6)

1. hidden cams
December 29, 2018 at 8:00 am

It is in reality a great and useful piece of info. I'm satisfied that you shared this helpful info with us. Please keep us up to date like this. Thank you for sharing.

2. bidab
April 26, 2021 at 2:08 pm

The Jewish seder egg is not attested until the 16th-century Shulchan Aruch. It is improbable that it influenced the Christian tradition.

3. Barbara
December 1, 2021 at 3:04 pm

How do I remove shiny coating off a blank ostrich egg before painting?

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